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Understanding the drama of democracy

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Published in:
Critical Policy Studies

Publication date:
2013

Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

[Link to publication in Tilburg University Research Portal](#)

Citation for published version (APA):
de Graaf, L. J., Metze, T. A. P., & van Hulst, M. J. (2013). Understanding the drama of democracy: Looking back at the Seventh International Conference in Interpretive Policy Analysis. *Critical Policy Studies*, 7(4), 422-424.

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On: 23 December 2013, At: 10:27

Publisher: Routledge

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Critical Policy Studies

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rcps20>

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Published online: 19 Dec 2013.

To cite this article: Laurens de Graaf, Tamara Metze & Merlijn van Hulst (2013) Understanding the drama of democracy: looking back at the Seventh International Conference in Interpretive Policy Analysis, *Critical Policy Studies*, 7:4, 422-424, DOI: [10.1080/19460171.2013.851150](https://doi.org/10.1080/19460171.2013.851150)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/19460171.2013.851150>

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FORUM

Understanding the drama of democracy: looking back at the Seventh International Conference in Interpretive Policy Analysis

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‘It is time for a new era, a new dawn has come. We will be the world’s first Monarchist Anarchy’. With these words, an actor queen opened the Seventh International Conference in Interpretive Policy Analysis (IPA), in a theatrical way. This 2012 IPA conference was held in Tilburg from 5–7 July. The Queen was referring to the theme of the conference, *Understanding the Drama of Democracy: Policy Work, Power and Transformation*. Over the last 10 years, the political and administrative landscape in the Netherlands, Europe and the rest of the world has been changing radically. In Europe, there was an increasing power of populist and radical right parties. The economic crisis challenges the credibility of European governing. The Arab spring illustrates the increased voice of citizens in illiberal democracies. There is an ever growing influence of China and other ‘non-Western’ countries on world politics and markets and so on. These are all challenges for politicians, policy-makers and other governing actors. In addition, these developments can be interpreted in a broad variety of ways.

In order to understand this changed world, insight into the performative dimension of policy-making is increasingly important. The presentation and interpretation of politicians, of policy-makers, but also of arguments and of facts are of great influence on their credibility. This challenges actors involved to cross boundaries, to learn, to transform, to deal with constantly alternating power relations and, at the same time, to be perceived as authentic or trustworthy. More and more interpretive researchers study how public actors perform in practice. This means that they pay attention not just to language-oriented dimensions of practice, but also to nonlinguistic action and emotion. Moreover, it raises questions about the role of interpretive research in the mediation and transformation of different meanings, and in creating or supporting policy learning.

The seventh IPA conference illustrated the wide scope of interpretive policy analysis. The pre-conference (organized for the second time at IPA) hosted 45 participants who were introduced to IPA by Dvora Yanow and were offered an in-depth account of interpretive research in three workshops (ethnography, interpretive design and discourse analysis). Around 320 people from 33 countries registered for the general conference and more than 250 papers were presented in 39 panels. The conference included two round-tables, three methodology workshops, six *Authors meet their Critics* and, last but not least, three keynote speakers. Prof. Dr. John Forester argued that interpretive policy analysis extends far beyond being an elective choice of academics. It is also a ‘working necessity’ for engaged policy practitioners. As he said,

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We might develop an interest in the micro-politics of planning and policy analysis practice to include an assessment of the theorizing and interpretive work that such practices call for, if not required. Exploring these questions will lead us to consider issues of ethics as well as epistemology, intersubjectivity as well as subjectivity, argumentative performativity as well as 'content', retrospective interpretation as well as the imagination of contingent futures.

Prof. Dr. Mieke Verloo, the second key note speaker, focused on indirect state interventions, pointing at those in which certain interpretations or definitions of the world are made 'real', and in which strong normative positions are taken and sanctioned. In processes of contestation, she argued, 'meaning is never fixed, is always in flux, dynamically created as a direct or indirect, intentional or unintended result of power configurations.' She further outlined a (comparative) critical frame analysis and showed the kind of results that such an approach produces. In addition, she posed the question what we can aim for with discursive policy analysis, reflecting on the normative side of such analyses.

The final key note speaker, Prof. Dr. Alletta Norval, argued that – in contrast to institutionalist and procedural approaches to democracy – a practice-based and performative account of democracy is needed, which focuses on the emergence, staging and articulation of demands. Democracy, on this account, starts from the ability of everyone to 'talk back', to be an active participant in games of governance and is not restricted to a set of predetermined institutional domains and activities. Taking a wider view, Norval argued for

a dual focus on both the initial staging of demands – those moments when democratic demands break through the threshold of visibility and shift the stage on which arguments can be presented and heard – and the institution of a democratic ethos that foregrounds the ongoing work of democratic engagement. This view of democracy as practical activity that fosters virtues of engagement seeks to highlight the role of imagination and exemplarity in the articulation, maintenance and deepening of a democratic ethos.

The conferences also feature authors-meet-their-critics panels, in which new books were presented by their authors and commented on by various discussants. Amongst others, the Tilburg conference featured panels dealing with *The Argumentative Turn Revisited: Public Policy as Communicative Practice*, edited by Frank Fischer and Herbert Gottweis; *Authoritative Governance in the age of Mediatization*, by Maarten Hajer; and *Analysing Policy: what's the problem represented to be?*, by Carol Bacchi. Papers from the *Argumentative Turn Revisited* panel are presented in a symposium in the Forum section of this issue of *Critical Policy Studies*.

New at this IPA conference were the practice seminars. This format was introduced by David Laws and Hendrik Wagenaar, amongst others. The format was pioneered at IPA 2011 in Cardiff and has as a distinctive feature its engagement with practice. There were several formats in the 2012 conference: some started with a theoretical discussion of what it means to study practice; what practice is; and how it is different from, for example, discourse. Other seminars started with a practice problem that confronted policy-makers and worked from there to engage conceptual and theoretical knowledge in the discussion and perhaps even create practical judgment or phronesis on this problem. In all those practice seminars, policy-makers or politicians were brought into the room to explore and interpret the problem with IPA analysts. The seminars sought to create a close interaction between practitioners and researchers that were to lead to a joint learning process and different interpretations of the policy practice and the research practice.

This conference built on earlier IPA conferences and in all its variety shifted attention further away from generic (political) institutions and processes to meaning, to micro-politics, to enacted credibility and the study of practices, not only of governing actors, but also of public in a democracy. Participants explored ways to reflect on their research projects as a study of practice and performance and in this way to further problematize the relations between politics, policy and the public(s). This also brought in view questions about the way to study these with the help conceptual frameworks and interpretive methods such as more interactive views of storytelling, framing and discourse. The concept of a ‘Monarchist Anarchy’ with which the conference began can be considered an oxymoron that creates new spheres of engagement; it crosses invisible boundaries and adds an element of surprise and even resistance. We hope that this IPA conference in Tilburg encompassed these same qualities and contributed to *parrhesia* in the interpretive community.

Notes on contributors

Laurens de Graaf was trained in public administration and public policy at Radboud University Nijmegen and received his PhD from Utrecht University. He is Assistant Professor at the Tilburg School of Politics and Public Administration, interested in the practice of local democracy and (local) governance and specializes in citizen participation. His current research includes the work of exemplary practitioners in neighborhood governance and citizen initiatives in rural areas.

Tamara Metze was trained in science and technology studies and political science at the University of Amsterdam. She obtained her PhD in boundary work in deliberative governance at the same university. Metze is Assistant Professor at Tilburg University and interested in the democratic governance of ultra wicked problems. Her research includes the study of framing and contestation of hydraulic fracking for shale gas in several European countries and the USA.

Merlijn van Hulst was trained in cultural anthropology at Utrecht University and received his PhD from Erasmus University, Rotterdam. He is Assistant Professor at the Tilburg School of Politics and Public Administration, interested in the role of sense-making in planning and (local) governance and specializes in interpretive methods. His current research includes an ethnography of storytelling in police practices and the work of exemplary practitioners in local governance.